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What(ever) will be, will be

Abstract: The paper discusses from the perspective of the “Multi Word Expression” of the constructionist approach the particular nature of (apparently) tautological constructions, comparing these with other types of reduplication or iteration, generalized constructions and stereotyped idiomatic expressions such as *to kick the bucket*. Stereotyped idiomatic expressions are the result of a usually long linguistic tradition, while tautological constructions may be created in every particular (pragmatic) linguistic situation.

Keywords: word-iteration, reduplication, tautology, Multi Word Expressions

1 Different types of reduplication

The title of this article intentionally alludes to a topic Thomas Stolz has deeply studied in many insightful contributions: word-iteration. Apparently, *what(ever) will be, will be*¹ seems to be a tautological sentence of the “A is A”-type meaning “things are what they are”, i.e., a statement following the “law of identity” that Heger (1985: 469) dubbed as “absence d’information” since, logically speaking, “A is A” is necessarily always true. However, any English speaker will intend the sentence to express a kind of “cheerful fatalism” beyond human control.² Obviously, there is a

1 As for the history of the sentence, see Hartman (2013) where the author shows that the sentence was originally a heraldic motto of an aristocratic English family, perhaps firstly used by John Russell, first Earl of Bedford, after his experience at the battle of Pavia (1525), in the “Romance” form *quy serra serra*. Hartman’s conclusion is as follows: “Although it is difficult to prove a negative, my searches in authentic collections of traditional proverbs in French, Spanish, and Italian have produced no trace of KSS [abbreviation for the formula *Que sera sera*: P.Rt.]” (Hartman 2013: 63). In fact, its Spanish and Portuguese, French (and Italian) corresponding forms (*que será será*, *que sera sera*, *che sarà sarà*) are, strictly speaking, ungrammatical: it should be *Lo que será*, *O que será*, *Ce qui sera* (and *Ciò che sarà*), respectively. The motto seems a quasi-Romance form, invented when the upper classes of England were discovering the Renaissance. From the construction point of view, it does not matter that the iterated form (*will be*) occurs first in a free relative (or interrogative) sentence introduced by *what*. Indeed, we find the same iteration in affirmative sentences as *boys will be boys*, *business is business*, etc.

2 Quine (1995: 199) speaks of “tautological fatalism”.

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big difference between *What will be, will be* and other types of reduplication (henceforth RED) such as emphasizing REDs in *a very very old man*, studied by Stolz on many occasions (Stolz 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, etc.). The iteration / reduplication (on the terminology, see below, fn. 3) can also have morphological functions such as plural formation (= ex. (1)), a distributive function (= ex. (2)), an intensifying function (= ex. (3) and (4)), or have particular semantic values such as the so-called “echo reduplication”, as in (5), etc.³ A good overview of the multifarious functions of RED can be obtained when looking into the subject index of van Lier (2023: 1087, s.v. “reduplication”). Generally speaking, we can say that RED is a widespread strategy in the world’s languages to express many related functions (see Fedriani 2017: 147).

- (1) Indonesian (Stolz 2003: 18)
buku buku ‘books’
- (2) Malti (Stolz 2006a: 119)
bieb bieb lit. ‘door door’, i.e. ‘from door to door’
- (3) Italian (Stolz 2003: 36; Ramat 2019: 151)
un caffè caffè ‘a real, good coffee’
- (4) Emmi (Western Daly) (Louagie 2023: 555)
dukandji ‘big’ ~ *dukduk* ‘very big’
- (5) Turkish (Stolz 2018: 248)
dergi mergi okumuyor
newspapers m:ECHO read:NEG:PRES
‘(s)he does not read newspapers and the like’

3 Grandi (2017: 77) writes: “According to Medici (1959: 84), the aim of a reduplicated construction such as *caffè caffè* ‘coffee coffee’ [ex. (3)], P.Rt.) is “affermare [. . .] la pienezza delle qualità inerenti [alla base]” (‘to state the fullness / completeness of the qualities of the base word’). In other words, the primary function of reduplication would be to identify the prototype of a concept, its default value. If evaluative morphology (which includes intensification) encodes a deviation from a standard or from a default meaning, if its peculiar function is that of assigning a value which is different from that of the “standard / default” to a concept, reduplication primarily expresses a full identification of an item with its standard image. It identifies the best exemplar of a class”. Interestingly, in a mail diffused via Lingtyp (11.07.2024), Camil Staps notes that RED is used not only as a means expressing authenticity / prototypicality but also diminutive, inauthenticity, and atypicality as in the case of Makasar (Indonesia, Austronesian): *tau* ‘person’ → *tau-tau* ‘statue, doll’, *lima* ‘hand’ → *lima-lima* ‘hand-like object’ (such as a stick with twigs looking like fingers), *balla* ‘house’ → *balla’-balla* ‘hut’ (data from Jukes (2020)).

In the following example the RED is slightly modified in its morphological construction: the genitive RED (*zemiū*) is used to indicate a considerable quantity.

- (6) Latvian (Holvoet 2011: 16)

Viņš izstaigāja zemiū zemes
 3SG.M roam_through.PST.3 country.GEN.PL country.ACC.PL
 ‘He roamed through many countries’ (lit. country of countries).

Example (7) shows the insertion of morphological material between the reduplicating verbal lexeme.

- (7) Wandala (Central Chadic) (Frajzyngier 2016: 265)

Nóo và tǝ́-n kɪ̀ni njà-n-í-njà á-t wáfk-à
 PRES time T-DEM C.FOC sit.1SG-EPENTH-sit PRED-TARGET face-GEN
ordinateur yá ndà ǝ'lv Wándàlá
 computer 1SG speak language Wandala
 ‘Here I am sitting in front of the computer speaking the Wandala language.’

The last two examples show that, as is the case with many concepts of linguistics, beyond the strict RED definition, there may also be gradient stages of this phenomenon.

To note that (3) has a completely different meaning than *il caffè è caffè*, whereby the tautology (henceforth, TTL) “A = A” has very poor information (“absence d’information”), unless we imagine a special contextual situation (for instance, two people discussing the difference between coffee and tea, in which case Grice’s implicatures play a crucial role). In what follows I shall deal just with the iteration type exemplified in the title of this paper and not discuss other iteration/reduplication types such as those exemplified in (1)–(7).⁴

4 Stolz (2007) has dedicated an important article to discussing the difference between *Wiederholung* (iteration / repetition) and *Reduplikation*. *Wiederholungen* cause changes at the connotative layer. *Reduplikationen* have to do with changes at the semantic level (Stolz 2007: 57). The definition provided of *Reduplikation* is as follows (Stolz 2007: 64): “der Begriff Reduplikation [trifft] nur dann voll zu[. . .], wenn mit der Gleichheit der Ausdrucksseite auch eine Gleichheit auf der Inhaltsseite einhergeht dergestalt, daß der Gesamtkonstruktion eine andere Bedeutung zukommt als den jeweiligen Einzelbestandteilen” (“the concept of reduplication applies completely only if to an identity at the expression level there corresponds identity at the content level, in such a way that the construction in its totality acquires a meaning which is different from the meaning of its components’, my translation). This seems to apply to our *what will be, will be*-type, where the construct means more than the simple sum of the two parts. However, TTLs are not the object of Stolz’s article, in which he also states that it is difficult to draw a divide between the connotative *Wiederholungen*

2 Iteration, tautology and reduplication

However, both tautological sentences and reduplication make use of iteration, and it can be stated that word iteration can be found in every language, though with different scopes and different results. To my knowledge, no language has a rule forbidding word iteration / reduplication (see Stolz 2006b: 291–292).

So, the question is: what is the difference between reduplication and tautology? There exist TTLs such as *business is business* (= German *Geschäft ist Geschäft*) or *boys will be boys* which, like *what will be, will be*, signify much more than their literal meaning. As stated by Hagège (1985: 148), “Face à ces formules, toute analyse en termes de logique propositionnelle ne peut échapper au constat d’identité, et, partant, d’inanité” (‘All analyses based on proposition logic, when confronted with such formules, are bound to constate identity and, consequently, uselessness’, my translation). However, speakers, based on their encyclopaedic knowledge which is the result of the experiences done in their socio-cultural world, will give a particular sense to such sentences, which, if taken literally, are completely deprived of information (see Heger 1985, quoted above).⁵

TTLs of this kind are generalized expressions. It is worth noting that these TTLs are perfectly conforming to the grammatical rules of English and many other languages (cf. French *les affaires sont les affaires*; Italian *i soldi son soldi* ‘money is money’). New non-stereotyped TTLs can always be created: *a car is a car*, *apes will be apes*, etc. – and even *un soldo è un soldo* lit. ‘a penny is a penny’, though the stereotyped, usual TTL takes the plural: *i soldi* (see Ramat 2019: 147–148). As we shall see below, tense, mood, number, and other morphological grams do not matter in the TTL and we can have *cars are cars* and *apes were apes* without any change in the construction and value of the TTL.

Other stereotyped constructions too, like *to kick the bucket*, French *tomber dans les pommes* (lit. ‘to fall among the apples’) ‘to faint’ or Italian *essere al verde* (lit. ‘to be in the green’) ‘to be completely without money’ are used in non-literal meaning. The reason why ‘being completely without money, being broke’ can be

and the semantically significant *Reduplikationen*. Consequently, when dealing with TTLs, it is correct to speak both of iteration/repetition and reduplication, as I have done in this paper. On the difference between syntactic repetition and morphological reduplication see, however, Barotto and Mattioli (2020). They suggest a continuum between the two poles of reduplication and repetition / iteration, much in the sense adopted in this article.

⁵ I will not initiate here a general discussion of Wierzbicka’s (1987) Radical Semantics, which affirms that *Boys will be boys* cannot be translated into French by *Les garçons sont les garçons*, since French people have an encyclopaedic knowledge of the world different from that of English people. Such a discussion does not concern the topic of the present paper.

expressed by *essere al verde* is not understandable even to the native speaker; nevertheless (s)he will make use of this construction without problems, since (s) he has already heard it. Only those who study the history of the Italian language can explain the origin of the expression,⁶ and foreigners who have perfectly learned Italian and know both *essere* and *verde* will ask “what the hell does it mean?”.

3 Tautologies and idioms / generalized constructions

TTLs and idiomatic expressions such as *to kick the bucket* make up part of the “generalized constructions” (henceforth GCONs) illustrated by Goldberg’s (2006) constructionist approach as conventionalized pairings of form and function based on an input formed by general cognitive, pragmatic, and processing constraints.⁷ However, there is a difference between TTLs and other generalized constructions, idioms included: the (non-native) speaker, faced with the (unknown to him/her) TTL *What will be, will be*, might ask “OK, and so what?”. On the other hand, when faced with the GCON *going great guns*, her/his reaction will be one of total not-understanding, as in the case of *to kick the bucket*.

Speaking of GCONs leads also to a consideration of Multi Word expressions (MWEs). Hüning and Schlücker’s abstract of their chapter 24 (“Multi-word expressions”) in Müller et al.’s (2015) handbook of word formation defines MWEs as “complex lexical units, for example verbal idioms (*bite the bullet*) or frozen adverbials (*all at once*). Others, such as particle verbs (*stick out*) or complex nominals (*day-care center*), indicate a close relationship between MWEs and word-formation units”.

Crucially, MWEs refer to a unitary concept and by default cannot be interrupted by the insertion of other lexemes: the expressions **day-good-care center* or French **chemin-long-de-fer* ‘long railway’ instead of *good day-care center* and *long*

6 To satisfy the reader’s curiosity, the explanation is as follows. Time ago candles used to be green coloured at their base, thus when the fire reached the green part, the candle was near to being extinguished. Metaphorically the *essere al verde* came to signify ‘to be at the end of money, be broke’.

7 Among the first examples of GCONs given by Goldberg (2006: 5) there is the idiomatic construction *going great guns*, i.e., ‘proceed vigorously or successfully’, which is as idiomatic as *kick the bucket*. Note, however, that Goldberg’s GCONs include morphemes (e.g. *pre-*, *-ing-*), words (*anacanda*), complex words (*daredevil*), etc. However, these GCONs need not concern us in the present context.

chemin-de-fer are not admitted (for some possible exceptions see below). We are dealing with both morphology and syntax, as there exists the plural form *chemins de fer* and *chemin* and *fer* are also autonomous words, bound by the morpheme *de* in a NP. Such MWEs show the same structure as *(the) battle of Waterloo* and even *(the) King of England* which also admits a plural *(the) Kings of England* when we allude to the series of kings England has had throughout its history. Even totally non-stereotyped NPs such as *(the) doctor's office* and *office of the doctor* have the same nominal structure, though they cannot be considered as MWEs in Hüning and Schlücker's sense.

Moreover, stereotyped expressions such as *face to face*, French *face à face* (or *vis-à-vis*), Italian *faccia a faccia*, Spanish and Portuguese *frente a frente*, German *Auge in Auge*, Dutch *oog in oog*, Russian *licom k licu*, Irish *aghaidh ar aghaidh*, etc., with iteration of the noun in the construction {N₁ – PREP – N₁}, also belong to the MWEs. Sometimes MWEs are written with a hyphen, as in *rail-ticket* (and *vis-à-vis*), and sometimes they are not, as in *railway*, *sometime(s)*. At times, it is not easy to distinguish between MWEs and compounds, many of which may be idiomatic: *weekend*, *second-hand*. In fact, MWEs can be compound-like whose meaning goes beyond the sum of its components such as *parking ticket* 'official notice put on your vehicle that you must pay a fine'; or they may be formed by phrasal units with a non-compositional meaning that has to be learned as part of the lexicon. As in the example of *parking ticket*, their meaning is not composed of the meaning of their words, so that it cannot be derived directly from the words that constitute the phrasal unit. Accordingly, *going great guns*, *kick the bucket*, *tomber dans les pommes* and *essere al verde* can be considered MWEs (though sometimes they can be interrupted by the insertion of lexical material as in *essere completamente al verde* 'to be totally without money', the difference being that *chemin de fer* is an NP, while *essere al verde* is a sentence).

4 Tautologies vs idioms

After having introduced notions such as GCONs and MWEs, let us go back to the crucial point of this article. Strictly speaking, the constructions *que sera, sera* and *what will be, will be* can also be considered MWEs, inasmuch as the three/five words constitute a semantic unit, as well as *to kick the bucket*: pronouncing just the relative part *what will be* without its correlated second part, i.e., *will be*, does not make much sense. The difference between MWEs in their largest sense and TTLs of the *what will be, will be*-type lies in the fact that the latter are predicative nominal sentences, while the former constitute a unity, endowed with

a specific semantic value.⁸ Moreover, MWEs are idioms which, as we mentioned above, are part of the lexicon – more precisely, of the phraseology of a language. As they are fixed expressions, they need a certain lapse of time to become stereotyped.⁹ On the contrary, TTLs can be created at every moment and along with *what will be, will be* we can create, if needed by the context situation, *what has been, has been*; *what should be, should be* or *a dog is a dog, cats are cats* etc. In other words, TTL is an open possibility offered by the (constructional) grammar of the language.

5 The nature of Multi Word Expressions

To sum up, we may conclude that the label Multi Word Expression, which may include proverbs, stereotyped expressions like *as good as gold*, *by and large*, is a cover term both for tautologies of the type dealt with in the present article and generalized constructions.¹⁰ Compounds and MWEs as well as TTLs have the common status of complex lexical constructs, whose meaning is more than the sum of their components. While the constructionist approach, as a critique of generativism, is particularly concerned with syntax, the discussed TTLs underline more the semantic aspect. The MWE perspective considers both the semantic and the syntactic side of the sentence, at the interface of grammar and lexicon (see Sag et al. 2002).

⁸ See Mathieu et al. (2017), Schlücker (2018).

⁹ In political language as in the pub and other specialized languages it is frequent nowadays to find slogans whose aim is to be remembered as fixed expressions. It is, however, rare that such slogans become real MWEs that permanently enter the lexicon. Usually, they last for very short time, *l'espace d'un matin*.

¹⁰ See Masini (2005: 145): “the term multi-word expression is used as a pre-theoretical label to include the range of phenomena that goes from collocations to fixed expressions” For other types of TTL and RED, such as *step by step*, Afrikaans *een-een* ‘one by one’, see Ramat (2019). Foschi Albert (2017) examines the German and Italian type *x’x* such as *mehr und mehr* ‘more and more’ *parla e parla* ‘talk and talk’, as well as the RED without conjunction (e.g. German *lang lang* and Italian *lungo lungo* ‘very long’). In the same volume Bonacchi (2017) studies from a pragmatic point of view the Italian intensifying RED (e.g. *un cuore grande grande* ‘very generous, lit. a very big heart’, *Maria è una donna donna* ‘Maria is a real woman’) and its German equivalents which often are not fixed expressions as the MWEs are (*ein wahrhaft großes Herz* ‘a really big heart’, *Maria ist eine echte Frau* ‘Maria is a real woman’).

Abbreviations

ACC	accusative
C.FOC	contrastive focus
DEM	demonstrative
ECHO	image in echo-word
EPENTH	epenthesis
GCON	generalized construction
GEN	genitive
M	masculine
MWE	Multi Word Expression
N	noun
NEG	negation
NP	noun phrase
PL	plural
PREP	preposition
PRES	present tense
PRED	predicator
PST	past tense
RED	reduplication
SG	singular
TTL	tautology
T	target

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